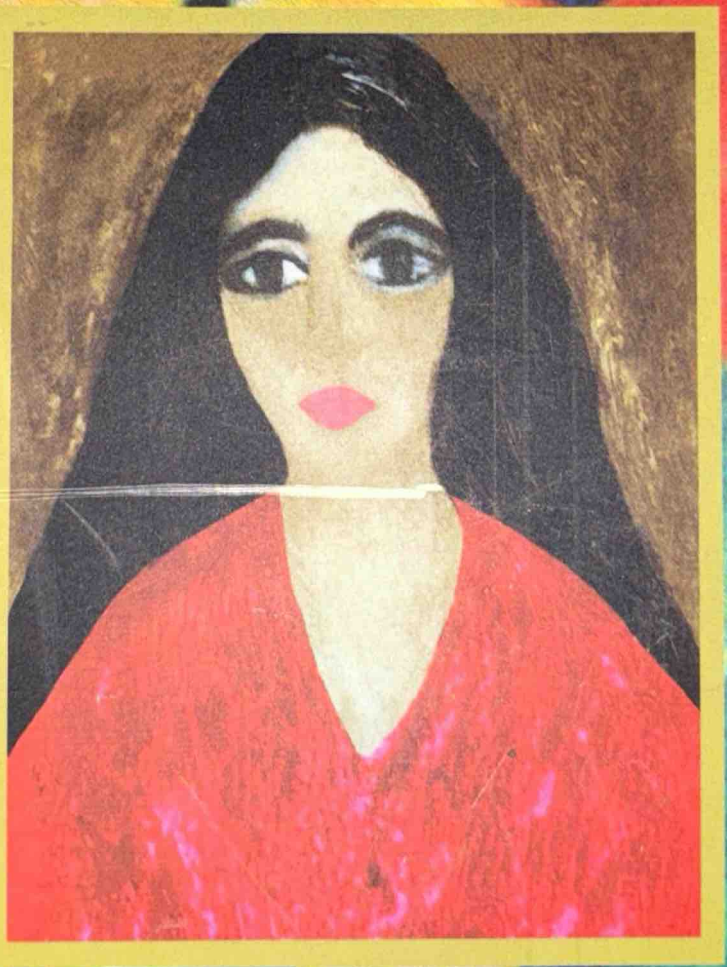
Introspection Poems



JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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Agnus Dei

Requiem for Ashley Halpe and the lost generation of our youth

Great chasms divide us fissured by time and age
our voices sucked into abysses of silence and
darkness, voices that once echoed in resonant
cadences of youth, lost, not even a single
haunting echo reverberates through those cavernous
mazes groping its way through those winding
routes its wandering spirit roves through
with no guiding hands to clasp in our
mortal blindness,

When, in what age did we know youth as we
meandered along those flower-strewn paths,
treading carelessly on those fragile, limp
petals crushed underfoot,

We embarked on our haphazard journeys,
stood uncertain at crossroad after crossroad,
perplexed at the multiplicity of choices
of which route to take to unenvisaged
destinations, unplanned, with no recognizable

landmarks, no hospitable welcome, left alone,
solitary, companionless.

Sometimes set out with summit-seeking agile
steps to reach those mountain peaks,
view a world far down below us
in that miniature panoramic spread,
dwarfed by the great heights we reached,
our bodies vulnerable, easily bruised,
cutting swaths through rough-bladed mana
grass, sword-sharp that drew blood from
our tender flesh, yet exhilarated as we
drank in fresh draughts of wind-wine gusts
that swirled about us, reluctant to descend,
pit our puny frames elbowed out by the
jostling multitudes in crowded thoroughfares
that impeded our adventuring reckless spirits,
hampered, bound, our bodies, by mundane
acts and speech which made us silent, mute.

That was another world we inhabited,
in memory, faces still bear the indelible
imprints of recognition, voices remembered,
retain their timbre, our bodies supple as
lithe panthers stretched out on the grassy verge
of a flowing river, in Keatsian mood we

mouthed odes to Nightingales, autumn, Grecian
urns, Keats' haemorrhage and death far from
our minds and thoughts, we did not seek to cease
upon the midnight without pain,
sought instead the balm of soft caressing touch
alighting on the broken wings of caged birds
released from prisons of captivity,
healed of their maimed flight, once more
to be taken up into the air, rising in
the surge of breathing wind, airborne
in freedom, far from the clutch of human
predators with their insidious traps and
nets to snare,engage in traffic for their
paltry gains,

We forded rivers, treading on sand, the softest, giving sand
through shallows, to reach the nether bank,
round the little fires we kindled,
gathered the locusts and manna to feed
our hungry souls to give us fresh strength
to take our further steps into the unknown
wilderness, sharing our thoughts, lingering in
that brief sunlit space of life before our
return, each of us to our own secret enclaves.

With ease we mounted stages, took on each
different role assigned to our dramatis personae,
disguised our common selves, assumed
the idiom of our new alter egos, enacted,
as we uttered our monologues, our soliloquies
all unaware in our insouciant youth
of the greater truths embedded in the complex
interplay between our own lives and the profound
speeches we parroted with ease.

Our voices rose in harmonious unison as we
sang in choirs of men and angels,
we had yet to create our own words, our own
cadences to the music that throbbed within
our hearts, our minds, words that gushed
a thousandfold with time and the swift
passing of the years, recapturing echoes from
that long ago past that faintly sound before
both words and melody, are lost.

University of Ceylon
Peradeniya
1950's/ 2016

Mindscapes

My mind unwinds reel after reel of images,
landscapes that are now embedded in each
vast unending scape with its recurrent
visions, unwind those reels in my dreams
and waking hours, reflecting my passage
through the convoluted passages of history,
merging into the uptodate routes of the
contemporary times I take, thronged with
the repetitiousness of everyday life,
of birth, of death with familiar landmarks
and signposts, the totems of ravaged
civilizations, bombed churches, roofless
abodes, mined wastelands, jagged crests
of withering palm fronds,

villas, deserted, abandoned, inhabited by
spectres that roam lost and desolate from
room to room, tree roots growing into
cracked walls fissured with windows gaping wide,
gardens with empty bunkers into which
reptiles coil and nestle in darkness,

everything gone to seed, except for
rampant weeds clinging to the parched
earth, doorless apertures, empty spaces
in uninhabited rooms, ruined homes to
which there will never be a return.

My mind unwinds reel after reel....

Dreams and Poetry.

A flash of insight, a piercing light
illuminates the inner darkness that oppresses
the sleeping spirit, rouses it to awakening,
creates transient images that ripple and quiver
in the mind, summoning the hidden visions
all expectant from their dormant slumber,
to emerge,

tantalise the imagination with unfolding panoramas
of regenerative lives, multiplying in gestation
after gestation of phenomenal beings appearing from
those closed in inner chambers with whom
I engage in fleeting dialogues,

beings, real or phantasy embodiments, encountered
on my reincarnatory passages through aeons of
rebirth, some of them still alive in memory
but who no longer tread this earth,

we meet at crossroads or veer off, take
different routes, I return alone, take a few

tentative steps in my halting gait wearied
after so many ruminative journeys, often
directionless, step back into a precarious
reality, my visions growing diffuse,
a fast vanishing world of dreams
with their intimations of another life,
another hidden existence in those timeless
spaces with their glimpses of eternity.

May Day and the Navarathne Pendant

Watched them all my life as I traversed the
crowded trader street shops open to the
uneven pavements spilling over with sacks
of grain, brown, white, saffron coloured dhalls,
green mung beans, parrot beak-red chillies,
liquor bars, textile shops with their profusion
of merchandise, natames, those agile labourers,
young, stalwart as well as worn out and
fatigued, their lives frayed, shoulders bent.

I watched them through the years,
men, shaggy-haired, bare-torsoed, chests caved
in, bones jutting out like some horny rocky
outcrop, ragged, stained sarongs hitched up
to the waist, the strong iron hooks grasping the
bulging gunny sacks and hefting them onto
hunched up shoulders, crossing the narrow
traffic-filled street at a running trot
to unload the commodities, sack after sack
lifted out of the overloaded lorry.

Men, past their prime with the moss and lichen
of age, on their faces, bodies,
bone-weary with labour,
form their daily lifeline to feed the
multitude, breathe briefly in a patch of shade
for a brief respite.

I sit in an air conditioned jewellery shop,
gemstones ranged before me in their velvet
cushioned boxes, designing a pendant with
nine gems for my daughter.
I gaze out on the sunny street,
deciphering name boards, my eyes catch
sight of an old man hunched and bent,
staggering with the weight of sacks on his
sagging shoulders, almost falls, tottering,
to walk a few more halting paces before
he slips the last sack off his shoulders,
then seeks out a cracked cement step to
rest, steeped in marijuana dreams,
closes his eyes until he wakes to greet a
new sunrise, when twilight and darkness
overcome his senses and he takes his final
gasping breath.

May Day 2016.

Metaphysical

Other than words, spoken, written, how else do
I explore the mazes of my mind to reach the
outer world, compel my listeners to give ear to me,

do I follow the mimicry learned from many tongues,
is it my desire to speak then in the tongues of men
and angels or do I become the artisan of a language
I devise, using the rough, unformed ingots of words
to smelt, create, carve, sculpt my own Fabergè
or Bellini jeweled gold intricate artifacts
to embellish a collector's dream.

Vainglory if nothing else, the rough-hewn sculptures
of my words create their own landscapes through
which I wend my way, treading unknown paths,
encountering the startling, the sudden apparitions
that have long been concealed in the wilderness,
phantoms, apparitions disturbed by my iconoclastic
approach, stand stock still listening to the strange
cadences that emerge from guttural throats,
tremolos, shrill echoes, sounding a myriad

wind-strung instruments, rasping against
echoing sounds in the tingling air,
listening, I pick up harmonies, discords, which
enter my ears to create my way-out thoughts.

I give ear to find a new language
in which I shape my stanzas, my thoughts,
my fictions, filling the lonely hours of my
brief earthly sojourn with the music of the
spheres from those celestial constellations and
galaxies that sparkle and stun the senses
with light, moving like blazing spheres
through my inner darkness,

but first create out of my earthly wanderings
my own landscapes, treading as I do,
unknown paths, encountering the wonders
screened off to mortal eyes, those rare
vulnerable creatures engendered out of the pure,
pure sources of an untouched, unblemished
natural wilderness, my soft, cautious tread,
careful not to approach with iconoclastic
grasp, the delicate wings, the plumed feathers,
the transparent petals with my vandal hands,
nor disturb with the guttural syllables that
I utter, the echoing strands of wind instruments

that emerge from cicada throats,

listening with ears attuned to those harmonious
cadences, tremolos quivering through the air
of throbbing, whirring strings of a myriad
cicada woodwinds to which my own voice
attunes itself, harmonies, discords enter my
ears resonating vibrating, echoing, to create
a new language,

I utter my own monologues, my own
soliloquies, speak to myself in those
lonely hours, weaving those endless stanzas
with their images, curiously wrought in that
fantastical self-created universe with galaxies
that sparkle and illuminate the dense clouds
of my inner darkness.

The Temple of a Thousand Pillars

Thirukoneswaram

Removing the blindfolds of time and age,
treading the burning embers of that penance walk
I feel the naked soles of my bare feet seared,
untried now, no longer travelling on rugged
trackless paths in search of those illusory
Utopian dreams to reach the nadir of climactic
dreams and visions which would lift me to
some unexplored summits hidden in the clouds,
inhabited by those ethereal spirits and disembodied
wraiths with whom I breathe the purest,
unsullied air in those unblemished celestial
landscapes,

the descent is steep as I retrace my steps
precipitous, sheer with all the hazards that
confront that necessary, compulsive return
to the country of my mortal habitat of loves
and hates, embezzled in those risqué games
with those high stakes of life or death
to be won or lost, tramping once more the

dusty streets of the world, just another mendicant
or routeless pilgrim, beseeching alms to sustain
my strained and frazzled spirit with an
elixir sip of water from a wayside spring
or trickling stream, renew the utterance of
stifled words from my parched tongue,
so that those syllables spill out in quicksilver
globules that coalesce and form their magical patterns.

Now the time has come to begin the steps towards that
ultimate destination, but first with halting gait,
go past the old landmarks in that fortressed territory
with their quaint architecture of bygone eras being
slowly dismantled by the centuries, the plaster
peeling, patches of grey-green mould spreading
on those time-battered garrison walls, a fortress
of that once closely guarded protectorate which
changed hands from the invasive expeditions
of warring rival nations in that endless
quest for power, for possession, trade, spoils,
leaving the harsh imprints of their boots
on historical landscapes, the worn out leather
streaked and seamed with wear and tear.

Where now are those men-o-war sailing vessels,
those massive hulks with their towering masts,

their flapping, winged sails billowing out
as those sea battles raged over that ocean, impassive waves
unruffled by blasting cannon, and hurtling
thunderous sound of iron fire - balls,
through Time's hourglass driblets
of blood trickle in crimson, unendingly
until the shattered crystal is smashed against
the stanchions of once unassailable barriers,

I walk now with measured footsteps, no longer
alone, but buttressed by the presence of my youthful
guardians, watchful, alert to my missed step
or stumbling on uneven paths until I reach
that climb, so arduous, so painful, the summit
of that sacred rock with its overpowering god-presence
of Siva looking out at the striving pilgrims
that thronged those sacrosanct precincts,
enter the sanctum once pillaged and destroyed,
looted of its treasure, that ruined edifice resting in the
sea - bed, shadowy, spectral, spreadeagled pillars and
columns lying athwart the shallow translucent waters,
through which shadowy shoals of fish pass through those
sunken portals of that Temple of a Thousand Pillars.

The scorching pathways lead to that celestial Kailasa
where I desire to feel the breath of those deities pervade

my very being, my feet, their soles protected from
the flinty tracks with their sharp-edged jagged rocks
crushed by the wrecking storms of turbulent eras,
are set on fire by the burning spears of flinty
sun-struck sand, my whole being set on fire,
purged in that much sought penance tread, to
reach the spirit world, give ear to the timeless
ragas awakening their chords within my psyche,
revoke those ruinous epochs of the vandal-plunder
of historical warmongers in their desecration of that,
to them, pagan world, a world that's now
restored effacing all the sword slashing,
blood-shedding invaders whose bones are
buried in unknown burial places leaving only the
spectral shadows of memory, nameless, anonymous.

1950's/ 2016

The Island in the Sea.

Nilaveli/ Trincomalee

Is that island rising out of the clear cerulean blue
of the ocean where I look out from among the grove
of mangroves on this glittering sun-mote struck shore,
in this unperturbed, unmarred landscape,
footprints sand embedded washed away by the
surf-edged waves that break upon the shore,
the remembered island of my youthful days?

Sighted, now that island on the horizon stark against
the sky rising like a sea creature from some
prehistoric age, humped in the ocean, static,
impregnable, the island that once more beckons, tantalises
with hidden mysteries, wreathed and enshrouded in
silence, where once our voices babbled, excited,
in our intimate discoveries among rock outcrops,
white pitted coral, red pockets of earth and briny
sand,

our voices echoed and re-echoed like shrill
sea-bird cries and now those haunting strains

wail dirge-like in my ears but our words
are now all forgotten, words of surprise, joy,
now whispering in the conch shells of memory,
empty reminders of the death of the sea and
its manifold sea creatures drowned in forgotten
oceans of that timeless dreaming when
our skins and hair were burnished, golden
with youthful bloom, sweet and salty with
sun and wind-spray brine,

that island, once explored, now appears as
distant as youth, there's no going back
to that elusive, chimeric image with
the silenced tongues of the once living,
for me, the island tempts re-discovery,
will I find the self-same rocks
studded with thorn-sharp cacti that drew
blood, glazed lizards of glittering jade and
emerald-winged insects impaled on spiny
twigs, at any rate existence was precarious
to all the vulnerable creatures who lived
for the day with no thought of the morrow,

in those spendthrift hours my feet probed
every nook and cranny of that uninhabited
island without a thought of return to the shore,

so far, so far away from the darkening
horizon, all unaware of our doomed,
impending fate and unenvisaged destinies.

I measure distance, standing on the shore,
with a palm-span, between my stance
so static, the ocean and the island,
beside me an empty boat, the oars
resting athwart its sides, a waiting boat,
how can I step in, companionless with
my laboured, tortuous limbs cramped
with age, where, too, is the boatman,
I cling onto a mirage which no longer deludes,
await another boatman with a familiar
name, Charon, the boatman of
a mythic past which now stirs my
mind to the new voyage I must take,
leaving behind my human shadow that
I clung to all these living years.

Pigeon Island- Trincomalee
1950's/ 2016

The Migrant Argonauts

'The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece,
Where burning Sappho loved and sang,"
now the migrant argonauts set out on their
desperate odysseys in their frail unseaworthy
crafts to reach those magical, mythical islands,
Delphos, Paphos, Lesbos,

it's left for the bards and the chance spectators on
the shores to chant the elegies, pronounce the
obsequies for the nameless, anonymous bodies drifting
in the waves, washed up on the shore, sunk within
the ocean depths in their sodden burial, liberated
by death, unscripted lives so soon effaced.

For those who have taken flight to become the
sea wanderers, there are no stopover islands
to quench their thirst at freshwater springs
or even to be metamorphosed into any other
living creature by a re-awakened Circe
and her magic spells, the wine-dark Aegean
sea is for classical epics and Homeric odes

not for the reality of doomed lives and that
deathly passage into our contemporary epics
scrawled in those torn drifting scraps that
litter the desolate shores from afar in memory,
echoes wafted in briny breezes reach a chance,
listening ear, dirges of ghostly voices chanted
in the monotone of the perpetual ebb and flow
of timeless waves,

like strewn, washed up shells, conches, bleached
starfish, hollow crustaceans, bodies splayed out
on those beaches or half-buried in the oozy sands,
leave their brief shadows, to be scooped up, borne
away, soon forgotten, their contraband lives lost,
smuggled in loaded vessels to be snuffed - out as
their living breath is stifled, bodies tilted into
the surge, mingling with the shoals of fish as
they plummet into the seabed, in their broken,
fractured flight,

is it callous to search for metaphors, make
ourselves the new death-harbingers, avoid the
clichétic turns of phrase to dispel the horror
of that which we impassively view from the safe
corners of our lives, our emotions pampered
in our safe havens, screening out the dark

horizons and unruly passage to uncertain destinies.
We watch, we who stand on safe shores,
tortured with macabre dreams, hallucinatory,
crumpled or outstretched fingers slowly bleached
wrapped in sand, soaked in brine, the emptying
boats bloated with human cargo, spilling their
body-caches into the waves,

no one hears those voices,
silenced in our own minds.

We must now re-invent that classical jargon,
confront the new heroic figures of the past,
Odysseus, Ulysses, Priam, Helen of Troy in our
current and contemporary day and lives,
set up the temples with their classic columns
on the shores where the colossal waste of
human sacrifices are offered to the deities,
but then, do marble breasts and stony hearts
fill with grief, do those blind eyes brim with tears?

Our thoughts so brief in mourning drift like frothy
spume then vanish before we too who have
moored our boats in safe harbours, lay our oars
aside which once we used with all the might of
thews and sinews, complete our own hazardous

voyages and as all mortals destined to, perish,
but did we not at some time in our own Odyssean
travels and hazardous ocean passages, go in search
of that golden fleece that Jason led us to go in search
of, never to abandon hope?

Bildungsroman

Turning over the pages, reaching the final chapters,
do we read the epics and sagas of our lives,
self created?

Volume after volume so closely documented, episodic,
filled with all the techniques, the strategies of the skilled
litterateur, often iconoclastic toppling down the jaded
images we erected, sculpted with the vanity of the
youthful image, chipped now with the sharp and
jagged weapons of time, of climate, of marauders.

Memorabilia? Too full of cloying sentiment,
not for my life at any rate, lacks the vanity
of the self-complacent raconteur, then what do
we call this manuscript, whom does it tempt to
pick up from the market bookstalls of this world,
is the language couched in my own tongue
with all the echoes caught from the remembered
voices, guttural or tender-sibilant, spilling out
of those cornucopias or pot-pourri collections of

spectral blooms faded beyond recognition of the
natural, to stir my somnambulistic dreams to awakening?

Serialisation, sequelae, arias, ragas, titanic
landscapes of the imagination or mined no man's
land, the frail clutch at a straw of the drowning
man, inhabiting the sites of history, an imposter
in those vanished epochal centuries to find
that microcosmic being to flesh out an identity,
one that is the chameleon or harlequin persona
or protagonist in that fictional playground
where I devise my own ploys to gain my
invisible victories without a gaping crowd of
spectators to hurl stone-hard garlands to
stun me, blunt the sharp edge of my
clumsy weaponry or roughly self-contrived trophies.

Life, my life, unnumbered pages, etched with my
quaint symbols, loose pages, ultimately gathered
and sewn into some semblance of meaning and
significance, an amalgam of all the contextual
references to my life that was never and never
will be edited by the great connoisseurs of literary
craftsmanship with theories that marginalize and
inhibit the procreant creativity of these impromptu
appearances that posses the urge and thrust of

spontaneity, the garb of this role-player changed
at the drop of a hat, to reveal the original
couturier of self-designed modes and fashions.

Now that the literary epilogue must begin,
I peruse all those narrative techniques with
its complex twists and turns, find that my unwitting
discoveries embody the literary artfulness
with numerous plots, themes, climaxes, anti-climaxes,
denouements, several dei ex machinae,
monologues, soliloquies, interchanging of roles,
assembled together into folio after folio with
the manipulative expertise of the born adventurer
who set out on dangerous routes without a guide
or map, fell into abysses, got stuck in boggy
quagmires, stumbled on rutty footpaths,
rubbed shoulders with murderous assailants,
sometimes unable to dodge the almost death
dealing blows, halted at caravanserais to sup
and bed in flea-ridden, pestiferous, dingy
chambers foetid with stale human odours.

Not always. No, not always. There were moments of
heightened bliss, transient and illusory but sufficient
to ward off the miscreant experiences that deluded
the body, mind, imagination, however brief,

leaving their imprint, indelible on the illuminated
pages of my manuscript, the colours still retaining
their radiance and the gilded figures still all aglitter,
uneffaced by centuries of wear and tear.

Sometimes, in search of a metaphor, come upon
the volcanic lava flow with its molten splurge,
emptying from its cratered inferno to rush down
the mountains and ravines in living tongues of flames,
in its deathly consummation with life, with nature,
in that doomed terrain, untrammeled, unrestrained,
the valleys, human habitations sculpted in ash.

Reams and reams of pages unfold in the spaceless,
timeless mindscape, day by day, hour by hour
throughout the unresisting decades which heralded my
birth, blind eyes startled into awakening,
my urgent cries compelling recognition in this
new world that welcomed me, cradled in the arms
of love and warmth before I began to grope my way
through spatial, mindless silence, my tongue unsyllabled,
its sounds, incoherent, babbling, primeval, craving
for those compulsive needs to be met, until I grew
strong enough to venture from Eden Garden to
wilderness, face temptation in the vast desert among
predator throngs of humans with whom I could not

grapple or escape but licking the wounds of defeat,
continued on those venturesome excursions into the
unknown zones and sites through which I scrounged,
a vagrant traveller, to pick up and piece together
fragments carelessly strewn of my personal histories,
leaving me an unkempt, lonely straggler.

Now my gait is halting but that overspill of words
still continues to flow from invisible yet perennial
springs, fountaining out to fall in pristine
jets on the parched earth of age, all passion spent,
look, my eyes still peer into every crevice, every niche,
where words and words from the dropped seeds of
that invisible world of the mind, take root,
sprout up, to overpower the cringing dust that palls
the earth, while tender shoots appear,
mantling with green the skeletal bones of rock and
denuded gardens ravaged by death and sudden
disappearances in a vast and lengthening
burial ground, suffocating in the miasmic
breath of crowded disembodied spirits clamouring
for release from their spectral lives.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability has an imagined shape, a form,
colour and texture, bird-body, leaf-contour,
in ripening fruit and rainbow-hued flower,
the stalk to be grasped, twisted, wrested by
rapacious hands.

Rapunzel

For Dorothy Poulier

Thick braids of hair, woven black silken strands
flowed down, over my shoulders, stark against
the starched white school uniform, among those
ordered rows of straight-backed, docile students
sitting in their ordered rows on the roughly-woven
choir mats unrolled each morning for our august
morning school Assembly,

the rough coir grazed our tender skins,
skins smooth, unblemished, unwrinkled,
all unknowing of what our futures held for us,
listening instead to the predictions of old Testament
Prophets and of the dire consequences of the dark
days to come or of the coming of the Messiah,
to me sometimes with intimations of adventure
stories or strange rites and customs or stern
consequences for sin, urging repentance,
proverbs, poetry, law, justice what was there
that was relevant to our daily lives centuries
and centuries later, we were yet to relate those

sagas and epics to our own lives within that territorialised
colonial enclave, aware finally in our grown
minds that history could be painfully repetitious.
We were no new breed but found occasional
resemblances, humanity had not changed,
or had it, for better or worse?
Think new of Mary Magdalene who anointed
Christ's feet with precious unguents,
the woman who wept, shed tears
and wiped His feet with her long tresses,
beseeching forgiveness for her sins.
Repentance, reconciliation to me are all allied
in our own lives, is that precious ointment
a symbol, a metaphor for that act of repentance, then?
does that act still hold good for us?

My own long tresses are now shorn by time and
age, the story of Mary Magdalene an occasional
reminder of the power of those biblical stories which stir
echoes of those long ago memories, Samson's
strength in his hair, that power lost with Delilah's
wiles and duplicity, hair that was in charms and
talismans used as an integral part of the soul, unbound
traces could control the spirit world, Kali,
that divine deity was said to command the

weather by braiding or letting loose her hair;
the covering of a woman's head, concealing
hair, was tied up, with superstition within
a sacred place of worship, for me, an
ordinary mortal, hair had nothing magical
about it, but to my friend, my hair was
something that was almost talismanic, magical.

Remember now, her face, straight smooth tresses,
unblemished olive complexion, delicate hands,
ivory keyboard fingers, playing with my
braids, 'beautiful', she would repeat,
'so thick, so heavy……..'

those days long lost, surrounded as we are
by spectres of time, her voice echoes,
re-echoes in my mind,

I was her Rapunzel,
I wish I had let down my unbraided
tresses to help her reach me in my
captive tower of self,

give me my freedom in that release,
break that deep silence of separation.

The Tables are Laid

This is not the time to speak in parables or even of
Christ's Sermon on the Mount,
this is not the time and age to speak of the miracle
of the feeding of the multitude of five thousand
with three loaves and six fishes with baskets of
the remainders still plentiful, being gathered,

Look, the tables are laid,
let us feast our eyes on the bounty
on the platters, mouth-watering delicacies
which tradition has ordained generation
after generation, radiant lights illuminating
every nook and corner of every abode
in the enactment of those sacred rituals,
the inheritance that never palls,
times of penury forgotten but the absence
felt of those whose migrations have whisked
them away to different continents and other
worlds,

even if those lights are quenched,
the platters emptying, hungers appeased,
each man, woman, child going back
to their own lives taking up from where they
have left off, this renewal, this celebration
is the moment, not of mere display of
wealth or largesse but that significant
pause in time and that expectant looking
forward, year in year out, to our own
return of the Lost Sheep or the Prodigal Son
to the haven of family and the welcome with
open arms, repentance accepted, even
forgiven for our own selfish concerns,
all forgetful of the family bonds severed,
forgotten with thoughtless unconcern,
but now, it is home that beckons,
enveloped in the warmth of being wanted,
needed, remembered before the fires go out and
the ashes lie cold on the hearth.

We wait, yes, we all await the rebirth of
the next New Year and all the years to come,
to place the new pot upon the hearth,
light the fire, the flames leaping up
in orange tongues, the brands kindled to

stir fire-branches, urge the placid pool
of milk to rise and spill its frilling
lace-like froth to stream in lavish spread,
enveloping the shape of ritual time in that
recurrent pledge with the ancient rites
so longed for in those auspicious cosmic cycles.

Going over the Top

The Somme. First World War
1914 - 1918

The bones of the dead still sing their dirges,
their tongues never to be silenced,

whispers creep up through the kind earth,
their wavering echoes bend the breeze-shaken
grass strands and stir the tentative quiver of
ripples in those secret waters' limpid flow
over the glistening rocks,

those whispers are nature's way of preserving
the voices of the dead, sibilant, yet toneless,
sound like bells that have lost the ghostly
tolling of death-chimes,

diligently they stoop and bend, men camouflaged
in their earth-stained uniforms, already dead
men who have risen from their graves,

the earth scooped out, dug deep, deep until the
iron strikes the buried rock and stone of ancient

tumuli, disturbs the huddled terrified creatures
that concealed within escape wounds and
decapitation from the iron stakes that pierce
the crepitating flesh or curb the seed
and sprouting tendril or severs the life-bearing
root before the tender saplings
can grow tall, take breath, stretch out
limber thick-leaved fruiting branches.

Dig, dig, dig deep without stop, their own death
burrows waiting for the alarum to sound
death summons as they scramble over the top
and offer their victim-bodies to that awful
deity, Mortality, who accepts with impassive
countenance, the gush of spurting blood
in that futile sacrifice,

the heroes go over first, needles of adrenaline
emptying in their veins,
then fall, leaving briefly, their bodies'
weight upon the earth, until some kindly
hands lift those insentient beings, bear
them away to the waiting biers,
who will chant their requiems or drop
the fresh sod on their graves?

Where have their souls fled,
will they be minute specks in the celestial spaces,
float among the galaxies,
while we still grope through time
striving to unbind those imprisoning
bonds from our pinioned limbs,

those men, whose names we never knew,
whose voices were silenced,
breath snuffed out from guttering candles
the wicks immured in molten tallow
create the worn out metaphors in our mind,

their flesh and earth now mingle, become one,
their blood that freely flowed moistens,
nurtures earth, gives life to residual scattered
seed that sprouts and thrusts its way through
breeched earth and rock,
to reach light, sun, rain.

Nothing now mars the landscape,
memory unearths the flawless flesh of those
sacrificial lambs on those death-altars.

We remember.
Yes, for all time,
we remember.

For Mungo

Belungala,
my childhood-tall mountain,
that fortress-rock, verdure covered,
with thick bushes, hoary trees, wild lantana
flowers, a trackless route to its summit,
borne on my father's shoulders to the
peak parting the hazy screens of mist
to glimpse a mirage-like ocean,
an ocean I was yet to reach,
a seascape distanced, a cloud-dream.

These were all different worlds,
far away worlds, Bible Rock, a blue
silhouette against that spaceless sky,

terraced paddyfields leading down to the
valley, a valley chequered in green,
a poem that I now scan after aeons and
aeons, familiar with those stanzaic images
embodying those historical metaphors in
temple, ambalama, homesteads with roofs

thatched with new-harvested straw or
diamond shaped country tiles, village
gardens, orchards, the spread of patterned
viridian paddyfields, for me, a longed for
haven that in my timeless journey
I could never reach nor ever rest,
yet it was in my childhood garden,
day after day, hour after hour I planted
myself, growing stronger, beginning with that
tender shoot to firm resilient stalk
tended by my guardian spirit, Mungo,
sitting together in those secret enclaves
we created beneath the shady red-blossomed
mara tree, the earth strewn with fallen flowers,
red, fragile crumpled blossoms silk-soft against
my fingers gathering petals that I crushed
between fragments of glistening stone, to yield
their moisture, their juice.

We sat together, each within the other's shadow
our fingers entwined with supple twigs and
leaves, ferns and flowers,
my ears attuned to the bird calls and fluting
echoes carried by the wind that blew across
the valley to my house perched like a white

cormorant on the hill before it once more
took flight flapping its wingspan wide,
disappeared into the sky while I waited for
its return as I still do, searching for my roost.

Mungo entered my childhood, her spirit and mine
became one, wherever she went, her feet trod
lightly, softly, bare feet that felt the earth, the
grass, the fallen flowers beneath them.

Mungo, your face, high cheek-bones, ruddy
skin, your hair glistening with oil,
smoothly combed back, strand by strand
and knotted at the nape of your neck,
the silver koora like a miniature spear
jabbed into that coiled knot, in your long-stretched
earlobes tiny cylinders with translucent red
rubies like pomegranate seeds, filled those elongated
lobes, I counted one by one with my small finger
the silver buttons on your crisp white jacket,
your wrist encircled by the talismanic bracelet
and round your throat the silver chain and sura
encased within those sacred lines of magical
words for your protection,

my eyelids drooped, my eyes drowsed with sleep,
closed, as my body rocked upon your outstretched
limbs as you sat upon the woven mat laid out upon
the cement floor, crooning your lullabies.
Mungo.
We have gone our different ways.
I am still a wanderer on the face of the earth
and you have completed your samsaric journey,
surely for you, a pure life untouched by evil,
it is nirvana you have attained
with no more rebirth, no more reincarnations,
no more hinsawa, no more suffering for
your athmaya,

wrenched away from your pure soul,
enfolded once in your protective arms
I am still a traveller, a solitary wanderer
on that lonely pilgrim path.

The Voice Within

A voice within my mind inscribes each word,
a voice that I alone can hear, stringing together
stanzas, narratives emerging from that invisible
source that is constantly replenished, that perennial
spring within that natural grotto created in my
Eden garden, a voice which I share with that other self
possessing all the nuances, the inflexions of my
familiar argot, transferred to that other being I have
given birth to, my inseparable companion who
mitigates the loneliness of the spirit, interminably
echoing those thoughts with their insistent words
that speak to me, compel me to give ear to the
words I hear so clearly but first there must be
silence, then from those secret hidden niches, out
of the deep unsullied spaces that other voice begins
to talk, not tirades, not harangues, not spouting
out polemic but a stream of purest syllabic water -
voices, crystal clear from that bedrock spring
to irrigate the unploughed acres covered with
bedraggled weeds, so that the hidden seed

sprouts, pushes out of earth in its new birth
to flower, fruit and burgeon forth to create
that garden that divinity ordains to grow,
to flourish with the fantastic foliage that transforms
a mundane sombre world into landscapes
still to be inhabited, still to be peopled with
humanity, creatures of survival in a new
world where the beginning was the word
and that word was with God.

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The Rag

The torturers, are you surprised, are human,
the offspring of human gestation,
grew up strong, resilient emerging like
procreant seed rooted and nourished in the
hospitable earth, burgeoning forth in the natural
cyclic seasons to fruit and blossom filling the air
with fragrant promise for all creatures of the earth.

Look, they are human with recognizable lineaments,
flesh and blood, who exude that precious breath
of life, with whom we share knowledge, thought,
love, not hate, food and drink in our common
humanity.

They too sleep, dream, awake to consciousness of
day, of light, walk together in that beginning
new journey, taste of the milk of human kindness,
created in the same image yet within
each of those assailants lurk those demons
that possess their crazed minds and thoughts with
brute hands, upraised in violence and distorted

faces, grimacing lips and tongues that spew out vitriolic
words, obscene, abusive, the acid of hatred
flung on cringing fearful faces.

Yes, we are all created in the same image
but within us also lies that alter-self,
deviate, twisted, tainted, murderous,
let loose to vent its spleen on those
they overpower, inflict terror, hatred.

Retrieving a life

Retrieving a life from the shambles of the quakes
that rack this fragile frame set up in these
impermanent climes, quakes that shudder through
its structure with full force, its fall, toppling over,
pinning down that inner spirit, the hapless victim
all unprepared for the yawning chasms that open up,
piling up with suffocating dust and shards of
debris, the voice gagged and silenced, breath
stifled, ears deafened by the crushing thunder,
death edging closer like some unseen assassin,
a hand tight-clasped against the mouth, the
tongue weighed down, shrouded in breathless
darkness,

emerge, if you are pulled out, your paralyzed
limbs, your inert body shuddering into life,
that invisible pulley drawing you into the stunning
light, doomed to live out a few more trifling
years upon this ravaged earth, gasp out your
last hours in polluted air, erect once more
the self's temporary structure to uphold a

shelter for a maimed and mangled life
that seeks an illusory tranquility after its
traversal on a marred and rutty landscape.

Wisdom, Late Comer

Wisdom, late comer in my life,
the guide, the mentor so much needed
in my errant youth where I flouted all
the laws that would have been my safeguards
against those calamitous happenings that racked
my being in the wastelands of the past,

unacquainted I was with all the subtle ploys
meant to seduce my mind, so malleable,
so easy to ensnare, trapped in tensile webs
of deceit where my puny self struggled to
disengage itself but failed, giving that self
to be that minuscule prey engorged upon
by a wily predator,

time with its racing hands on the clock face
of the years striking its pendulum of impending
doom, has ceased its relentless course,
no one remains from whom to seek reparation
for those nameless crimes invisible to the
naked eye,

no judgment to be exacted on those
perpetrators in those murderous onslaughts
that assailed the novice in that rapacious
vandal grasp that wrung the cringing
throat of that doomed bird, the air echoing
with dismal, plaintive cries pleading for reprieve,
evading slaughter.

One day perhaps murder will out,
the trials resumed, the witnesses summoned,
judgment pronounced for all those victims
tortured, lives snuffed out in the rage
of war and genocide, the living breath gas-suffocated,
the secret abductions, all mercy withheld,
bodies often buried in those incinerators of
destruction for whom we, the survivors, mourn.

Embryonic Thoughts

Thoughts in my mother's womb
were the beginning, to form, embryonic,
without a syllabled language, vibrant strands
streaming through the arteries and veins,
travelling through that precious binding cord
linked to that maternal life-giver,

thoughts that begin to form within, the womb,
the growing foetus preparing for its genesis,
break out from that safe haven
to be thrust out into the world where I
will begin my uncertain stumbling journey
on the crowded thoroughfares with jostling
throngs, elbowed out, buffeted by those great
wind gales that swirl about me, caught up
like a leaf that's lifted into the air,
twirled around in spiraling currents,
float like a frail airborne barque
on stormy cloud oceans until I fall,
vanish, spent, faint, disappear,
forgotten.

Silence, a Night Bloom.

Silence, a night bloom, spreads its fragrance,
intoxicating, narcotic to drug the senses,
enter my dreams, lifted bodily into surreal landscapes
that exist in an alter-world of the mind's creations,
an ethereal transference into an unworldly existence
in which my brief stay adopts the metamorphosis
of different personae, conjugating verbs, parsing sentences,
stanzas that convey in secret code the language that has
no resemblance to everyday speech, images in diverse
shapes, tactile, multi- hued, transparent or opaque,
transformations, metamorphoses, emanations of spirits,
disembodied, floating in dimensionless space,
without destination between celestial spheres and earthly
realities planted by human manipulative hands
in bizarre disorder and disarrangement with
grasping tentacles of greed, there are no strategies
in dreams, the depthless, voidless consciousness
with its labyrinths and mazes are rich in nuggets
and precious veins of ore which the imagination
mines, probes and prises out in pure, sparkling

prisms of radiant light to illuminate the
darkness of the world in which I am the chief
protagonist of all the enactments I stage,
my script spontaneous, my characters stepping
into their roles in their personifications of good
and evil, vice and virtue, guilt and innocence,
truth and falsity, deceit and guilelessness,
fleshed out characters encountered in real life
and not on some imagined stage,

Mythbuilding

Is mythbuilding the many storeyed yet frail
structure on which my life rests, tottering with
the weight of its ever-soaring ephemeral architecture
embodied by the spectral blueprints created by the
imagination, soaring up to reach an imaginary
world, illusory, impermanent, but sufficing
as habitations for those lone spirits which fill
mortality's brief span, sharing spaces with those
insubstantial unrealities of other worlds which
give credence to that of a supernatural universe created
by sages, philosophers, poets trying to give semblance
to their visionary insights into a monstrous world
of death and destruction in their perhaps naïve
explanations for the cataclysms of a crazed universe.

How can I, akin to each mortal with clay feet
enter that world unless I draw on my own
creation of that insubstantial cosmos with the
visionary eye of one who parts veil after veil
to encounter the hidden truth in the deep recesses
of the past in which I stand, somewhat afar, a

viewer and an onlooker, a spectator of heroes, heroines,
deities, muses, myself humble and uninitiated
yet perhaps to be aligned with those beings,
consigned to a supra reality in Elysium,
Valhala, Kailasa or wherever in time and history
they have their celestial or mythical existence, apart,
from my own humdrum thought meanderings,

but with dawn the breath of dreams is dissipated,
you wake, your senses still half-drugged with
opiates, drowsing eyes still blurred with receding
images that you cling onto, reluctant to face
the brilliant dazzle of the day, search for springs
to lave your body, water that's crystal clear
stir ripples as your limbs surge through the
limpid pool that mirrors the glinting shapes of
iridescent fish, clamber onto cool water -splashed
rock in those brief moments before you don
your day to day garments to join that vast
concourse in life's processional through the
well-trodden paths that you and the strangers
you encounter, take you in your predictable
on unpredicted journeys and solitary pilgrimage
to a hidden sanctum in some existential
wilderness or mountainin, that mythical world
of self- created, delusive Utopias.

A Cast-off garment

Innocence lost, the garment you cast off,
a worn-out discard never to camouflage the deception
to cover the nakedness of shed disguise,
but the chill winds creep within your crepitating bones
so you gather up the sullied remnants, that torn pennant
trailing in the dust, often you lick the wounds of defeat
at the hands of unassailable foes in that titanic clash
with unequal forces, overcome, vanquished,
leaving that puny self kicking the dust of defeat
on the raked up battlefield with the approach of Armageddon
and the Apocalyptic horses that predict our united doom,
where no one will remain invisible but face the
condemnation of Judgment Day that spells
our doomed end.

Remaining Behind

Remained behind, did I really want to go away,
find a home in a country named on the map
well known for aborigines, kangaroos, convict ships,
Captain Cooks and the exodus of my own kind soon
joined by those who were not kith and kin to find
a place to set up camp.

Have I missed out?
My children too?
Do I have to talk of adaptation?
fitting in, missing home, familiar places,
regrets at staying back to face everything
that caused turbulence and disturbance,
turmoil and displacement, fear, terror,
insecurity, hard times, feeling myself
wandering lost and rudderless, inhabiting
a time zone that had gone awry,
the weather vane lopsided, twisted by errant
stormy winds, nightmares of being hunted,
pursued, left out in the cold, hiding behind

frail barriers invisible but immovable making
us who were 'the other', the enemy, threatening,
dismantling the sacred territory by invasive
terror forces,

did I seek asylum,
did I want to enter unknown zones
where I thought I could settle in,
hospitality was denied me,
I had to find solace in refusal,
mine was not to be a success story
in those new environs, I had to find
new escape routes and walk incognito
through a world in which, refused recognition,
I stayed back, yes, now firmly ensconced in
my familiar grazing grounds where
I have found a certain comfort,
settled in, look around, find now
that only death can oust me from this
haven of my own creation,
I journey back and forth through history,
negotiating those complex intricate mazes
that gave rise to the genesis of myself and
my people, play around with the ironies
of my gestation, the interwoven strands

of diverse bloodlines that pushed
me into this new sequestered corner
of my life, to live out my days in
what's left of this long sojourn,

Weave narratives, string stanzas together, make even
the incidents of a common life, epic,
spectacular, removed from the mundane
incidents of what's predictable, follow, pre-ordained,
inherited traditions and rituals, bear magic talismans,
utter spells of enchantment,

I have untethered myself from all the
bonds, found release, no longer feel
imprisoned within structures erected
by those archaic architects who claim
ownership over every inch of the land
demarcated by the proprietary landowner,
in whose hands all power lies.

The Source

Memory cannot be effaced,
keeps me alive even as I look on
my island with its vegetative profusion,
listen, watch, spin my own yarns hour by hour,
empty poem after poem from the pockets of
my mind unlike the base metal of ill-begotten gains
derived from the debased coinage corroded with
the corruption of evil procurers of human lives,
my hands never abraded by the handling of those
emblems of silver, gold, copper, bronze to purchase
the servitude of vassals and minions who laboured
to pile up the spoils of oppressive bondage,
my senses stung by pungent pepper,
inhaling the narcotic fragrance of cinnamon,
crowing over the booty that filled the warehouses
of history while secreted within the thick walls
in those cool caverns niched in the hungers
to be appeased of a world left behind,
wine and cheeses unspiced by the aromas of
conquest-flavours.

Episodic Search

Pages from a poet's autobiography

Where do I belong,
have I through the years
lost my bearings?

uncertainty assails me,
that confusion of routes with this complex
network of highways and byways,
unmapped territory where the intrepid adventurers
had still to step into, parting screens of
clinging vines in dense forest cover,
lush fern banks crepitating with lurking
creatures in moisture- laden sanctuary coverts
where the interloper is unwelcome and natural
life continues with its uninterrupted inbreeding
where I encroached, all unaware of the seductive
area of that fragrant darkness vibrating with
rasping antennae, creating night music, dream-
reverberating in those musky shadows,

I did not know my way through that mazed
hazardous wilderness bewitched by those
primeval instincts that awakened in that
undiscovered being of self, all unprepared
for whatever revelations would unfold in
that paradisal genesis of the Fall of Man
in those contemporary biblical enactments,
only those pagan emotions counted in their ritualistic
miming and mimetic posturing of our human lapses.

My poems begin at some centrifugal point in my mind
and then veer off, an alighting fritillary lying on some
entrancing blossom with its promise of nectar,
a fleeting sip, a brief stay in and then
taking off, bearing its flirtatious ambit to try out
some other virginal honey- cusp, just a droplet,
a sample of something more potent,
enough to dizzy the senses and then?
what follows?

Before the velvety gloss wears off and the wings
sunscorched, frizzle and lie crushed on the
grass besmirched by ant hordes,
it is pure ecstasy to taste what is so freely,
unresistingly given and replenished, the act
repetitious until the petals wither, the honey-

sap - thirst quenched, leaves the flower throat parched,
yet the poem goes on and on
until another meteor hurtles out of the darkness
to splinter my mind into scintillate fragments
which cut the edges of the whirling disc
of the imagination caught up in the celestial bliss
of discovery, evading in transit the dark holes
that threaten,
so, the poem goes on and on,

Tell me then, where do I go from here,
my followers have defected, dragged out
of the fray so I'll gather my glad rags
around me and sally forth unhindered,
my backpack grows lighter as I throw out
sundry items, scraps of writing that end
up finished, unfinished, complete, incomplete,
no longer worth preserving,
scraps,
fragments,
wavering strand-thoughts,
spiraling tendrils of stanzas,
my food, my sustenance in days of darkness
and despair, all hope abandoned,
recall the agonizing over loss and death,

become an ever wandering migrant of history,
joining that gigantic mass exodus ashore
who will offer asylum to a vagrant, aged, poet?

Clutching my rags about me I limp on
I am one of the thousands among this anonymous populace,
my voice, a mere croak,
a beggar waiting for the Apocalypse.

We are the survivors of Armageddon,
have tramped and trudged, limped along
with the raggle - taggle of asylum seekers
who have reached the no zones of our
fragile unpredictable journeys,
encountered all the hoi-polloi along the way,
has a people-smuggler helped me get through
or some uptodate trafficker of human lives,
collecting his purloined loot along the way.

What have I left behind of my past?
The fraudsters and tricksters who
beguiled my idyllic youth with their deception,
no, I would not say I was always
blameless, that my hands were clean,
that I was guiltless of every conceivable

crime that even my mind and thought accomplished,
nor did I pause to wipe away the tears of mourners.

Confessional must needs be part of my penitential
mission can't escape blameless for my
misdemeanours, wrangling, corrosive words,
deceitful malingering, walking out of lives,
leaving them in shambles, let me now finally
shed my pretentions camouflage, appear
fallible, mortal, vulnerable, disarmed
of all those contrived ploys, present the
tattered credentials of the travel-weary
pilgrim with outstretched palm for sundry alms,

self-questioning,
self- revelation,
left to begin from where I have
left off, return to that initial insistence
query,

Where do I belong?

Claiming Legitimacy

I am forced to seek legitimacy through history,
give credence to an identity unwittingly generated
by a polyglot band of adventurers who named
me and my kith and kin compelled by the church
and perhaps conscience but left behind to fend
for ourselves without a qualm to extend the procreant
progeny of those sometimes casual liaisons,
yet I have wormed my way through the mazes
and labyrinths of the centuries, become a part of
those intimate fleshly- diaries of lives I know
little of except for names, badges of identity
belonging to the countries those entrepreneurs
and seafarers came from,
documented their personal histories
fictionalized from my own carefully
garnered knowledge of those epochs in which
I have a stake erecting my indestructible,
impregnable fortress that has withstood time
until my tenure has lapsed and mortality effaces
my puny efforts to resuscitate the past.

My efforts at times have been strenuous,
my search deep, earnest, to learn more and
more of those ancestral beginnings, the
forays in this land where those armed
men and ledger clerks who devised the
new genre of literature in their thombos,
with their newly contrived linguistic terminology,
included me and my kind, in instinctual
pursuits and left their impress on the
varying hues of diverse complexions
on their multiplying progeny listed not in
thombos but perhaps in the marriage registers
to which the proselytized had access,
with time the baptismal records too gathered
strength, is it there then, that I am able
to claim some legitimacy and not be abandoned
by the wayside directionless
in the obscure bylanes of history?

What of their natures, their lineaments, their
innate qualities have I inherited,
I continue to turn page after page of closely written
historical records, study the armaments listed
in battle, their well-cut military regalia
which made them sitting ducks in the
tactics of guerrilla warfare, curious too

about the commissariat, their taste in
food, drink, women, their personal preferences
in times of peace, when they became sober
householders smoking their long pipes and
growing rotund on reichstaffel, wine,
gin, beer with slaves to serve them at their
beck and call,

Those stopovers were transient, temporary,
the lessons that appeared in their structures
turned into vast cracks laid waste by the
depredations of time, their heirs did
not profit by their invasive acquisitions,
they left no Deeds of gift, no inheritance,
their offspring, often Wards of State,
the only claim to legitimacy in documented
wapenherauts and genealogies, leaving
ourselves as the fleshly signatories of militant
histories, it's left to us to either subvert or
assume those colonial bloodlines by veering
off those complex routes that led to unmapped
destinations, until the left behinders embarked on
lands flowing with milk and honey or so they
supposed, in their migrations, where they shed
those outworn garments of identity and accoutred

themselves to become anonymous and unrecognizable,
assimilation and disguise concealing the truth of not
belonging,

I know for certain I began my birth in some
stranger's loins but self assertian gives me
a greater sense of who I am, rather than those
hand-me-downs of well-worn, well known
names as common as they are in evolutionary
jargon, I have forgotten my own identity,
disrobing myself of the accretions and excrescences of
that colonial outfit, depend on my own flair
for designing the colourful harlequinage of my
garments with their strange, bizarre cut that
will stand out in the crowd to excite either
praise or jeers but make what is commonplace
noteworthy, distinctive unlike the ill-fitting
garb of the mendicant who seeks alms from
the forgotten forebears of vanquished eras.

Dirge for the Civet Cats

Viverra Civetta

A strong musky perfume obtained from the sweat glands
of the civet cat, the viverra civetta
with its barred and spotted coat,

caged, netted and snared from the jungles of Africa
and Asia, incarcerated in barred cells,
ruby red eyes gleaming before the light diminishes,
and there's blood in their faeces, a sign of
approaching death, their movements in the emptiness
of those wooden-planked, steel-meshed enclosures
are the phantoms of that human slave trade of the past,
festering in the dank crowded holds of old, leaking
trading vessels bearing their shackled cargo,
suffocating in those feotid caves with their
odours of sweat and faeces, vomit and disease.

'I know when they are about to die
there is blood in their faeces", their captor says.

Such beauties, sleek coats, smooth, striped with deeply
branded bars, distinctive signifiers of their breed

I hear them on our ceilinged roof at night
clattering and racing in the darkness with
their ever growing brood, pursuing
rodents and other lurking creatures as they
forage for food, perhaps their red lantern
eyes pierce the darkness with their beams.

Such beauties, they are, sleek-furred, striped coats
thick with fur and distinctive signifiers
of their breed, bereft of their universe, grabbed
by throttling hands, strong sinewy iron bars
from which there's no escape from these inhuman
nature-rapists in their search for filthy lucre.

See the panic paranoid movements of the imprisoned
civet cats civets in their barren cells, cages and cages in which
their torture is that of political prisoners,
until slow death leads to their release
from the clamouring herds in civilized worlds,
black coffee with their subtle flavor from seeds
dropped by civettes after they have sucked the flesh
of the succulent berry, a priceless brew beyond
the reach of the common man, they, men and women,
do they now know the taste of that priceless
brew with the subtle flavour of death?

Invisible Mirrors

Often I find I am a stranger to myself,
invisible mirrors flash within my mind
to show those changing microcosmic images
distortions and all, lopsided, magnified, transmutations,
fantasies, devised within the imagination which
know no bounds,

selves, personae, metamorphoses, all the impersonations
we adopt to mesmerise the myopic crowds
who encroach upon a secret life, stargazing into
the universe dazzled by the radiance of those
galaxies so out of reach, inhabited by myriads
of spirits invisible to the naked eye.

True knowledge lies in that integral sense
of belonging to oneself, inhabiting the private
enclave with its antiquated artifacts with
clues to a past one somehow had a stake in,
the walls covered with those historical imprints,
daguerreotypes, sepia tinted, portraits of ancestors
accoutred in the fashions of the times with curled

I did not know my way through that mazed
hazardous wilderness bewitched by those
primeval instincts that awakened in that
undiscovered being of self, all unprepared
for whatever revelations would unfold in
that paradisal genesis of the Fall of Man
in those contemporary biblical enactments,
only those pagan emotions counted in their ritualistic
miming and mimetic posturing of our human lapses.

My poems begin at some centrifugal point in my mind
and then veer off, an alighting fritillary lying on some
entrancing blossom with its promise of nectar,
a fleeting sip, a brief stay in and then
taking off, bearing its flirtatious ambit to try out
some other virginal honey- cusp, just a droplet,
a sample of something more potent,
enough to dizzy the senses and then?
what follows?

Before the velvety gloss wears off and the wings
sunscorched, frizzle and lie crushed on the
grass besmirched by ant hordes,
it is pure ecstasy to taste what is so freely,
unresistingly given and replenished, the act
repetitious until the petals wither, the honey-

pomaded wigs and garments in mimic fashions,
now suitable for historical costume dramas
in those forgotten enactments, my own scripted
words giving utterance to those silenced voices
from the past, buried in oblivion

In a moment of truth I perhaps confront
myself stripped of its several masks,
engage myself in that intense scrutiny of
introspection, whisper my self-confessional,
a penitent of my guilt and careless, incautious
handling of those delicate, fragile lives I
destroyed in the twinkling of an eye, riding
roughshod on feelings, emotions I cared nothing of.

My self-confessional then is to seek absolution for
my sundry misdemeanours of which I am my own accuser,
but guilt of crimes against humanity I am innocent of,
crimes that will condemn me to eternal damnation
in a purgatorial world of outlaws, human traffickers,
cut-throats, felons, criminals whom we daily
rub elbows with and jostle in our crowded passage
through our turbulent lives.

I become my own interrogator,
search out that inner self stripped of all pretensions,

all false disguises to hoodwink the world with
false assumptions of a blameless life.

I have no wish to conceal the blemishes that
lie concealed beneath that apparent unflawed, unmarred
life, find myself in that image that stares
undaunted back at me in that true revelation
before I dash the mirror into fragments with
all its past deceptions.

Pitching my Tent

Am I searching for a landscape where I can pitch
my tent or clear a space in this wilderness of history
among the ruins that impede my step, with that intent
to create a structure, however impermanent, for my
nomadic spirit that will be a home, a shelter from
cyclonic storms and apocalyptic wars that rage in
almost every city of a world caught up in savage
turmoil, a tent is what I share with all the
multitude ranging from the migrant workers in
drought-ravaged villages with not a grain of food to eat
or water to quench their thirst, share too with the hordes
of refuge-seekers fleeing from carnage and displacement
through treacherous oceans only to be sucked into those
deep sea caverns to surface, washed ashore, dug
out of shrouds and wraps of sodden sand.

My hands, too work-worn, weak with flailing against
sundry misfortunes that battered my person through
the years, trying to shield this once hardy carapace
from the sharp knife blades that plunged into
the upturned turtle flesh,

no, in this desert landscape only the shattered
shards of brick lie strewn like crushed and
cracked burial urns on the ocean verge,
particles of ash still clinging vestigious within
the crevices, stones, rock perhaps remain leaving us
mindful of prehistoric tumuli, the raked up
furrowed earth gaping open, raw like
unsutured wounds of the dead and dying from
the battlefields, perhaps all I can ever hope for is
sparse shelter from the overhanging branches of a
dishevelled tree and shade from the filtering shadows
falling on the rough-pebbled earth,
yet still within my mind I bear the architecture
of dreams to be the shrine, the chapel, the temple
for my ultimate meditations, a sacred niche
where I can house the antiquities of the past in
memories that will never be subject to decay
or destruction, create a museum in the mind,

converse in spirit, reclining on a salvaged sofa in that
long ago abode that sheltered me, with the once
familiar well-loved beings of flesh and blood,
hear in whispered nuanced voices in those
urgent retrievable echoes I summon to dispel
my loneliness, but everything I valued once

has now been whisked away, with whom then
can I parley, garbed as I am now in rough
frayed vestigial garments, the rents and
tatters patched and darned, who will ever
welcome this wandering mendicant into their
midst, all that I have is that priceless pearl
I still guard, the precious emblem secreted
within the nacreous chamber of that spectral
oyster that still nestles close, close to my breast,
that single pearl, the remains of a remembered inheritance,
talismanic, protective that has given me, hitherto,
inspite of all the necromancers and predators
who engendered me, that inexplicable magic
of a charmed life.

The Traveller 1

Travel weary after all my jaunts through the
intricate mazes that led me out to traverse
unknown paths that I first began to explore with
childhood's early unsure and tentative steps, measuring
out my pace, first halting and then becoming stronger,
surer, away from the labyrinths with their dread of
the legendary minotaur lurking in that mythical
darkness of time past, aeons and aeons ago,
dark, winding tunnels choked, overcrowded with
the jostling concourse of explorers and wandering,
errant seekers encroaching on each other's preserves,
forcing me to pause, sometimes desiring me to take
a different route, more hazardours perhaps but less
frequented unless the intrepid spirit moves you on
to be a solitary traveller, companionless for sure
but to emerge when a glimpse of light illuminates
the blind darkness in that hellish underworld of
honeycombed caves echoing with the voices of the
lost, the lonely captives who have burrowed into
the depths of tombs and vaults where the broken

spirits have no release, no escape from captivity,
those who committed nameless crimes awaiting trial,
awaiting judgment, branded and bound until
death all merciful claims their spent souls and
spirits that wander aimlessly in those tortuous
dead-end passages, the breath choked out of you,
flung on the chill flagstones, moveless and
prone, until the spectral shadows haunt the
cell-like tombs,

how expiate those wrongful acts that maimed,
mutilated the unsuspecting victim who crossed
your path, cumbered your way, curbed the
force and power to counter you,
we were all travellers, sometimes sojourners in those
wayside booths, listening to the travails of those
who fell prey to all the vicissitudes of fate,
of destiny, unable to embark on the unfinished
journey or return to an uncertain safety,
stranded, penniless to become a wanderer
for life, a vagrant or a mendicant with
need for alms and precarious unwelcome
shelter from that reluctant inhospitable
inn-keeper who holds the key to give you
the grudging space in that caravanserai
of life.

The Traveller II

The ocean is watchful but silent
until the storms rise, the sky grows thunder-
dark and the sibilant tongues of waves that
whispered in your ear as you stood on the
pebbly fossil-filled shore which had secrets
to tell, so many mysteries hidden in
unlikely places, pick up an empty shell and
you hear the whole ocean unfolding,
displaying the secrets of creation,
watching the Mediterranean, watching the Atlantic,
feel I am all things, navigator , voyager,
piloting a sailing vessel,
or keeping my log book filled with my
sightings, sea birds, uninhabited
islands, dolphins, whales passing ships,

I was always a traveller,
began when I swam in the ocean of
amniotic fluid in my mother's womb,
was it then I began to dream,
did I bring those dreams back into the

daylight world I stepped into,
my dreams mingled with my mother's dreams,
all my life we shared them, our intimate
histories, memories, narratives,
that umbilical chord was a metaphor in
my life, never detached from my psyche.

Marooned, becalmed, my body a small rocking boat
in that womb-ocean, I never starved but fed on that
ocean food, cruising about,
I kept my grip on that lifeline.

Private Journeys

I am no seer, no sybillic prophetess, no oracle from
Delphi, do not fling a pack of predictive cards
with its esoteric cabbalistic significations to foretell
man's uncertain future,

I have embarked on my own private journeys,
a traveller whose backpack was often empty or
gradually filled up with the weightless paraphernalia
of scraps picked up here and there to be assembled into
some form or shape, give credence to the episodic
narrations in my collection, fragmented lines of poetry,
fiction or rough sketches, monologues, interchanges
in those violent confrontations that are inevitable
at barriers that rear up to impede my bold
approach to cross over into forbidden land,
kept back by border guards at frontiers protecting
their closely watched territory from the wild surge
of desperate asylum seekers where I too am counted
as one of them, insidiously I escape their vigilance
and slip in with my innocuous disguise,
continue with my explorations taking obscure paths,

avoiding the beaten track, something I have done
all my life, emerging unscathed from debacle after debacle.

Why am I always searching, always travelling,
always on the look out for the undiscoverable,
following clues to the direction I must take,
perhaps pick up a lost key to unlock that
secret store of half-forgotten documents to
claim those multiple strands of my identity,
link them to unforeseen invasive destinies.
Why am I always searching, always travelling,
always on the look out, for what?
Is it perhaps to give credence, flesh out a shadow-person
that emerges from those eras that have had
their far flung habitations in aggressive centuries,
safeguarded by the armaments and wily diplomacy
of traders, adventurers, territorial expansionists,
which gave birth to such as myself and others
who no longer have truck with the machinations
of those generations now gone to dust, leaving behind
a motley of descendents and ruined monuments,
fortresses no longer of avail to the living inheritors
of policies of subjugation and aggrandizements,
out of date, certainly questionable in that subtle
politicization of a people,

do I then belong to a raggle-taggle band piecing
together the historical homespun patchwork, stitched
together with whatever yarn or coarse thread at hand
to cover my lack of intricate weave and
opulent costume changes to suit the
climate of the times,

I am the chameleon, the colonial clone
with my lopsided grimace, irony-loaded,
to face the intrusive interrogator who probes,
scrutinizes the various layers of accretions
added on to my camouflaged aliases,
I perform my own choreographed ballet,
a macabre spectacle, my wrists still shackled
with the irons of a long captivity within the
dilapidated structures that my secluded spirit
dwelt in.

Where do I find my ultimate freedom,
disengaging myself from those invisible bonds,

finally, do I walk out free where I take refuge in
the anonymity of that vast throng I move among
unnoticed, just one of a crowd.

Frames

Never lived within a frame but wandered unhindered
through dimensionless landscapes inhabiting sites
both historical and legendary but which were rooted
in reality, not a mere figments of the imagination.

My journeys sometimes taken in flight but more often
taken by my free will, set sail in my private
odysseys where I kept my log book filled with
all those adventures in the endless pages recording
my intermittent stopovers on magical islands and
off the route harbours, abandoned by those now
ghost invaders whose shipwrecked vessels lie
submerged in those treacherous waters, awaiting a
chance discovery of human bones and caches of gold
and silver coins, spilling out to scatter among the
fish shoals and coral sculptures in that seabed
resting place until the pillage of the deep sea divers
plunged in to record those ill-fated voyages.

My freedom to move out, range widely over unexplored
terrain helps me to fill the endless pages of my personal

thesaurus with narratives which no vandal hands
tear up or shred, carried off by chance wind-gusts
to fall unheeded no one knows where or even cares to
pick up, piece together to read those cryptic
syllables of my complex stanzas, reeled off from
my innovative turns of phrase with the unexpected
twists and turns of the unknown genus of words
that keep forming in my questing mind.

No, never lived within the static, unmoving image
in a frame, my thought, my imagination,
unbridled, wild as an unbroken mustang
resisting the saddle and the reins that
human power exerted to tame my spirit
with curbs of strangling bridle, stirrup, blinkers.
In my free traversal of a horizonless landscape
I search out the unmapped territory of the mind,
create pointillist impressions of nature, water, tree,
sky in dazzling myriad prisms of colour
with the sable haired brushes I have with such
care procured from my forest findings,
brushes which never wear out to create the
harmonious geographies of my intimate unforged
mind-maps, the much sought after arrivals
and destinations which mark my routes,

become a sojourner in unfamiliar climates,
experience the burgeoning of plants and flowers
in the now familiar seasons to become
the itinerant literary trader-explorer with
my pedlar-packs full to bursting point,
on my return unpack my store of accumulated
goods not for barter and exchange or trading
for profit, my enterprises are of a different
order, nothing for personal gain nor for hoarding
but for that dispensing of largesse with a
lavish hand to the most needy, starved
of the good things of life, not handouts, not
base coin, nor opiates to dull the senses but
to offer that breath of life to the jaded mind,
the wilting spirit, the disconsolate and deprived
beings who hold out empty hands to beseech
for alms that will enrich the idle, vacant
spaces of the mind, fill those cornucopias,
the once-filled horns of plenty emptied of
all the treasure-booty, plunder with avid grasp
the brimming deep sea treasures of the mind.

Journeys and Search

Set out without a map clearly defined by the routes
to be taken, where safety would be assured,
lost my way, became a wayfarer, strayed out of
safe bounds, was led without a prophet-guide in
the wilderness, to reach that Canaan land flowing with
milk and honey, those tempting metaphors of hope
and fulfillment of that divine promise out of
captivity, is it the same hazardous route the new
do or die travellers take to reach the imagined
safe havens of adoptive countries a journey which
has been repetitive through the countries in the mass
exoduses that perennially take place, do I too then
join those desperate stragglers in their wild risk-
laden gamble for survival in any illusory haven.

How often have I stumbled over untracked desert,
raised plumes of sand to choke my breath,
sting my eyes to blindness as my malingering
footsteps led me to a hoped for oasis-haven,

tramped through unkempt paths tangled with
thorny weeds and snarled up creepers,
emaciated leeches craved for sustenance from
my blood to swell and bloat like incandescent
lanterns, my bold insistence took me into
unimaginable sites of danger and yet my feet
led me back, back to a familiar habitation
where my wounds were staunched, my bruises
soothed, with patient watchers by my side, waiting
for my fevers to abate and still my gasping
breath and grating hoarseness in my cicada -
rasping voice, scars of remembrance of my
reckless forays, emblems of my victorious
emergence, yet I do not bare my wounds
to an unheeding world preoccupied with
its own hurt and pain.

Who is left to care about the precarious sorties that
I made, encountering the lurking human predators
that lunged against my body, inflicted those
mortal wounds to flail against the unguarded
flesh, wounds that have healed but left the
mind scarred with invisible weals,

I have not been blameless, I walked mindlessly into those
danger zones, I did not baulk at those trepidatious

confrontations, yet I had no ploys or will to dodge
the assassins, allowed myself to be a captive slave
until I found my way out of that treacherous
wilderness with its roving reptiles and restless
spirits emerging out of the night,

find a way out, my life now dotted with
those memorable landscapes I have discovered,
left part of myself wherever I paused,
viewing life from the summit of mountain
promontories and thick-leaved forests
echoing with bird cries, perhaps a rare
Keatsian nightingale among them, I now have no need
of maps, my landmarks remain embedded in my mind,
with freshly springing foliage enfolding
those eras of my travels.

No Icon, I

Fingers that were never heavily beringed with gold and gems,
wrists never manacled with wrought silver and gold bracelets.

I was never a decorated icon to be paid obeisance to,
occasionally swathed my body in folds of woven silken
threads unwound from multitudes of martyred silkworms
immersed in seething cauldrons of murderous waters,
life snuffed out in an instant, the delicate sheaths that
encased those bodies unfolding inch by inch, the squirming
mass, stilled, yet oftentimes the tender flesh piled deep
within those gourmet casseroles perhaps to stave off
other hungers too with honey ants, crisp mantises,
grasshoppers, cicadas, winged-ant meroes, those edible
creatures of nature, their flight arrested, wings singed
by fire, ghost-like antennae which have lost their flicker,
night music stilled of the cicada's plaintive cry,
my need was never to stave off those hungers although
I too lived off the land, fed off the rich tubers
nourished by the deep down under earth, succulent
stems and leaves from pliant vines, lush flowers,
petals of crimson hibiscus, wild fruit and clustering

bitter-sweet berries, perhaps even nourished
by the biblical metaphors of locusts and manna.

The fatted calf was never slaughtered to celebrate
my prodigal returns but welcomes I always
received, that warm embrace of loving arms
together with forgiveness for a contrite heart,
once more to resume the daily grind, the toil
and moil of life in the hospitable acres
of a reclaimed inheritance.

Aftermath

The maps are all in disarray after the wars,
does peace in the aftermath create an
ordered world or chaos?

Familiar routes unlike the fate-lines etched
on the palms of your two hands are effaced
in these mined and disordered landscapes,
do you discover a single landmark that jolts
your memory to remembrance of the past,
the village, the fields, the groves, the temples?

Do you gaze up at a blank sky,
do you seek in your thoughts to follow
the flight of migratory birds in your thoughts
in that return from hazardous flight over oceans,
exhausted, surviving that long passage which
impels that much sought after asylum-haven.

You find yourself a stranger in a denuded
landscape, the trees uprooted, palmyrah fronds
lopped off, trailing like fading crests of

rainforest cockatoos, bare thorny branches
with spiky naked talons scrawling their
disturbed images on a bare, cloudless sky,

homes, vestigial abodes remain
half-concealed behind the disordered fences,
orchre-coloured of dried, pleated palmyrah
fronds, fallen,disintegrating,
all life has fled from those desolate rooms,
the roofs caved in, walls crumbling like
shattered anthills of once rock-hard earth,
empty, empty as if there has been a mass exodus,
retrace your footsteps, find another vacant plot
to rebuild your life, cease your futile wanderings.

Revelations

Wisdom, late comer in my life,
the guide, the mentor so much needed in my
youth when I flouted all the laws
that would have been my safeguards in the
wastelands of the past,

My mind so malleable, so easy to ensnare,
could not contend with the subtle ploys
of seduction in that naïve surrender of
a pliant will, too vulnerable to withstand
the insidious inroads into my life,
eyes dazzled by the first awakenings into
the false radiance that lit my path,
embarking on precarious journeys that
led me into a predator-ridden wilderness,
self-volition driving me deeper and deeper into
inescapable darkness, grappling with those
daemonic powers that surged about me,
grimacing with gargoyle faces,
beckoning me to feast on that tempting
array of forbidden fruit culled from the

underworld with poisonous orchards and
arbours filled with hallucinogic juices
to create those beguiling sense-enthralling images
which take you beyond the bounds of this
living world into nowhere, timeless regions
from which you are lost in a world of no return
until that day of reckoning arrives,
judgement pronounced on those rapists and
seducers who spoilt the innocent air with
their murderous deeds ensnared by their own
traps, their mangled bodies lying prone
in the dust, their dirges chanted by the
hovering death-scenting flies.

Mourning

A banshee wail went shrieking into the dead of
night on that deserted road,

a wail, shrilly screaming my name, pain, agony
echoing in every syllable with biblical clarity
pronounced at my baptismal font,
each consonant and vowel distinct,
jangled bells of sound clashing in discordant
chords,

for me, startled out dreams and sleep,
the repetitious echoes of my name
clanged in harsh tones of alarum bells,
presaging warning of the violent seasons
yet to come,

we wound and in turn are wounded,
we hurt and in turn are hurt,
the echoes of that long lost voice remains
in memory, those guttural despairing cries
that smashed, mangled my unblemished dreams

with untarnished images.

After all these long years,
I feel that searing sense of guilt
for the pain that I, so thoughtlessly, inflicted,
a pain that flailed another's mind,
driven to panic desperation.

His death, after a life that had righted itself,
was tragic, destroyed through a senseless act,
his skull split apart, axed by some stray
marauder in that incautious, impulsive
intervention to arrest a pitiful unknown intruder
in some petty act of theft.

I cannot make reparation to a spectre
that looms up from the past,

I have not forgotten my own act,
careless of another's deepest passion,

do others too, remember deeds of guilt,
of shame and regret, plead forgiveness,
make reparation however late.

The Blinding Speck

I was an irritant speck in the eyes of my onlookers
obscuring their vision, tried to rid their probing gaze
of that blurred image that distorted their view of
the world but those persistent fingers that rub the
bloodshot eye,failed, that stinging cinder stubbornly
remaining, difficult to dislodge,

what was the next move, the resort into the occult powers
in that last ditch attempt to rid the blurring eye
of those searing twinges, so abrasive, so painful,
clouding the eye, that irritant speck which was myself,
cleared to let that gaze alight on the blankness of
an unmarked landscape and an empty sky, bereft
of my obtrusive presence to spoil their vision,
abrade their sight.

Introspection

I possessed no map nor did I take the routes
mapped out by others, was a lost wanderer through
the wilderness with no prophet-guide to reach that
Canaan land flowing with milk and honey,
stumbling through the untracked desert,
raised plumes of dune-disturbed sand in my
flurry to find an oasis however small and vestigial
to rest, to pause in my relentless journey,
choked, blinded by spasms of sweeping wind-gusts,
yet never stalling until I reached what mirage-filled
horizon I was searching for through my
harsh passage,

my survival through risk and hazard,
subject to the untold crimes against humanity
vented against that vulnerable self,
scars, emblems of hurt,
invisible to the world to which no novice bares
those unhealed wounds.

Who cares about the precarious journeys that I made,
encountering the lurking human predators that lunged
against my body, inflicted their mortal wounds to
flagellate that fragile spirit that could not counter
pain or subtle wiles in a life that skirted
safe escape routes that would lead to some
haven in unmapped, untrodden territory.

I am not blameless, I walked blindly into
danger-zones, I did not baulk at trepidatious
confrontation nor dodge my assailants but
willingly allowed myself to be captive to forces
that curbed my resistless powerless being
until I found those secret bypaths that led me
out of that crushing wilderness inhabited by the
assassins and torturers, untangling those snarled-
up routes, separating their diverse strands
like wayward thoughts that wait to be
unknotted, straightened out.

The Beacons are Alight again

The beacons are alight on the Hanthana hills,
blazing flares of mana grass lighting up the
horizon with red-orange flares, fires that were
lit in the late evening, burned all night through,
sparks flying, the sky streaked with weals of
colour, then morning came and burned-out
patches of black spread their dark cindered
contagion to leave the earth fallow for the
tiny colonial flagstaffs to be planted.

Now the years have passed, the old wounds healed,
the scars effaced, the serrated rows of tea bushes
that dotted the hillsides have vanished together
with those bird-like women who alighted on
the steep hill flanks like hooded hawks, women who
spent their hours, their days and years, their
lives, in endless labour creeping back into
their cell-like line rooms to light their fires,
cook their meagre food, tend their children,
placate their fractured or wearied menfolk.

Those were eras that in my childhood I accepted
unquestioningly, I did not spare a thought for
the razing of that forest cover or for the silent
women plucking two leaves precisely and a bud
in those dark annals of our history, nor did
I think of that wilderness being depleted,
the wild creatures displaced or where they retreated
unless the gunshot echoed in the hunters' chase
for game, for sport, to line the walls of their
habitations with antler horns and tusks and
leopard skins, the trophies of their hunts.
No sanctions were needed for the sacking of those
territories, for uprooting the hoary trees, wrenching out
those deeply entrenched, centuries jungle totems, leaving
gaping cavities, the tumuli of the dead, buried
without tombstones and memorials for the mourning
land, leaving only vestigial pockets of survival
for those inbred wild creatures, leopard, wild cats
porcupines, wild boar, sharing their secluded
habitats with the rare birds that clung to their secret
coverts, resting, breeding undisturbed.

Images of the past recur in my mind edged with
licking tongues of flame that aureole those burning
beacons who can ever efface the memory of
those fires that consumed that thick jungle
cover swallowing up hidden villages,

claiming those unmapped acres to be the
fruits of conquest, acceptance without
protest, of those imperial arbiters,
the invasive inroads of the outsiders,
silenced voices that dwindled into
faintest whispers, lost their echoes,
died out without a whisper.

The flaring beacons revived in memory,
images recur of a ravaged forest depleted, inch by inch
the natural springs and waterways blocked up
by rockfall, boulders shifted in nature's upheaval,
leaving only trickles filtering in the waterveins,
that primeval untracked world stampeded over
by the heavy booted wanderers invading sanctuaries,
stripping the bark of trees, capturing butterflies within
the strangling threads of cavernous nets,
captive bodies to be pinioned and tabulated,
specimens of rare, dying out natural species,
all the orchids of the wilderness torn off,
their fragrance lost, packed away in haversacks,
stashed in private caches, animals displaced,
trees felled, the earth gouged out, flattened for
human habitations, once more the jungles burn,
the beacons are alight, this time appear as warning
signals of the cataclysmic destruction of our
squandered inheritance.

View from a Sixteenth Century Palanquin

A plethora of stories from an unshared, half-forgotten
past, traces remembrance in those chance
recollections of one who retrieves them from that
diminished mind-store, long lost in epochs over
and done with, of which hardly anything tangible
remains to be crowed over, those once powerful
clan-groups edged out of their hereditary domains
by strangers who have closed the gates on that
displaced generation now shut out with man-made
barriers to keep at bay the ousted heirs.

Once reigned supreme over those acres,
their prerogatives of power spreading over those
hierarchically mapped out lands wherein those
families had set their boundaries for generations
to come,

to know of those lives and times one must
either peruse those ancient scripts or listen to
the monologues of fragmented anecdotes,

personalized, descriptions embedded in the mind
of one who can never let go of those memories
where the ordinary man becomes the historical
raconteur of those vanished eras, eras
vanquished by wars, departures, migrations.

Where are the country bards, the seers, the wandering
sadhus who sang the praises of that noble family
and bestowed blessings on that household,
the holy men who shared their visionary dreams
linked to their intimate lives with the deities in
that pantheon with whom their day to day
rituals and worship were part of, year in year out.

They appeared, real men, not supernatural apparitions,
paused at the entrance to the grove, entered
those welcoming domains, were offered food,
water, rest before their journeys were resumed
as they walked on and on from village to village
and disappeared, lost to sight beyond the
flat horizonless landscapes, leaving the imprint
of their presence in the minds of those who did
not need to seek new destinations.

Not one of those who stayed behind envisaged
the cataclysms that would engulf them,

efface those roads, blast those structures,
with one swipe of a giant hand, sweep off
the last vestiges of those abodes once thought
impregnable, leaving the outjutting bones of
rock and stone foundations like the burial
tombs of legendary ancestors,

no clear pathway existed any longer,
trees that grew thick and wall-like reared
up from the earth and a well with murky
water, an opaque cataract filming it over,
blotted out its once crystal clear vision,

the grove that spread dark eagle wings of shade
now bare, with dismembered stumps of
truncated palmyrah palms that once sustained
that family with the nectar and ambrosia of
karuperni, rich red pinatu sun-drying on those
woven mats, then the wars came, pillage,
plunder, looting and unknown crimes
brought disorder and death, displacement
and flight, the wilderness, rampant, untamed,
with its dark impenetrable pall to cover the mourning
land, cloaking that wasteland without a single
human voice to croon a lullaby or chant their plangent
prayers or hymns, resounding through the echoing grove,

voices now gone into silence, leaving the land desolate
while turbulence raged about vulnerable bodies and
the exodus began on unkempt trails covered by piercing
thorns, tough weeds and knife-blade sharp wild grasses
but then the land had lain neglected, deserted,
the heirs had gone away handing over their inheritance
to strangers, there was nothing left to claim for those
who had lost their only foothold on the land of their
ancestors, what was there left then for recall?
Recall of what?
Recall of that past, what was imagined as an epic
past converted into sagas, recollections inscribed and
documented in the minds of those who were once
privileged, set apart in their enclaves to lord it
over the feudal minions, those legends handed down
like precious artifacts to be preserved now only in
memory, fading images of once legendary figures,
ancestors borne on elephant back to the court of
Sankily in Nallur, travelling those long, lonely
roads from the tucked in village of Navaly
where the family seat lay to all purposes, impregnable in
those days long ago, now there are no monarchs left
for tribute offerings, no necessity for vassalage
signified by scores of Vanni elephants,
rounded up, driven along the country roads,

chained with heavy shackles to the palmyrah trunks,
trunks now severed, amputated stumps,
those noble Trees of Life all mown down,
the elephants receding into that Vanni wilderness
rife with fevers, leaving bodies drenched in hot
sweat, pallid, emaciated bodies wrestling with the
engulfing jungles, territory mined when the wars
came, sites of ambushes, guerillas in their jungle
hideaways, there are now no claimants, no Vanni
chieftains except in name, not a trace of
elephant chains remain, the palanquin
discarded long ago, the household looted,
thieves and petty criminals took over the ravaged
land, the family dispersed, with nothing left to
reclaim, the curtains of the palanquin in tatters
long discarded, in that obscure past what did
the parted curtains ever reveal of the world that
lay outside their protected demesnes,
nothing that would disturb their lives
ordained by tradition, their heirlooms carefully
preserved to be handed down through the generations.

Did those women ever pay regard to the men who
bore the stalwart palanquin poles so effortlessly
from generation to generation,

did those women think that their world
would change as they undertook a myriad
journeys to shrines, to temples, or elsewhere in
their carefully guarded itineraries,

no, there was no presagement of that darkness,
they never thought the complacent landscape
they viewed would ever change, wrapped
in their narrow concerns, reclining with ease
among the velvet cushions.

No, they did not live to see the changes,
those who were borne on those palanquins
are no longer alive, died decades and decades ago
or have migrated to other climes,

that single palanquin long disintegrated,
the horse carriage dismembered,
no elephants to carry the grande seigneurs to the
Royal court at Nallur with all their regalia,
no feudal servers to carry out the traditions ordained by
society, branding them for life to render them
obsequious, to grovel before that imposing structure
of hierarchies creating that divisive apartness,
bound for life by those invisible bonds by privilege
birth and inheritance, with all their inhibitions,

but the time for change arrived with cataclysmic
force tearing apart those barriers of apartness,
those rigid shackles wrenched apart,
their flattered shadows that cringed in the dust
reared up and became flesh and blood,
with voices that were vociferous in their protest
as they surged through those sacrosanct
domains to claim the rights denied them.

The ropes gave way, the pot with its nectar
and ambrosia plummeted down,
no longer were the family retainers to climb
those palmyrah palms where they trod with
their inherited skills on that tightrope trapeze
day by day to replenish the pla for that potent
drink culled from the violated flower,
where had they all vanished, those men,
those women who for centuries had served this
household, tended the fields, gathered in the harvests,
carried pots of water from the well, treading
the well-sweep, scoured the cooking vessels,
pounded the grain, cooked the food for daily
sustenance, gathered the firewood, washed clothes,
engaged in a myriad tasks to make life
easy for those who belonged to that special
dispensation that ensured their rights,

Those eras are now all eroded, cancelled out,
I, that outsider, now penetrate that past
assembling all those fragmented anecdotes,
exploring all those nooks and crannies of that
long vanished structure of which not a vestige remains,

it makes me wonder about that past,
ponder on that way of life that was totally
alien to me, reconstruct a panoramic vision
of those feudal histories long gone to dust,
a chimeric vision of image after image
of that now, to me, historical landscape,
rent apart by unenvisaged changes,
those once powerful dynasties effaced, vanished.

What was it like, I wonder, for those women
of the family to be borne in that palanquin
on their journeys in their private excursions
away from their well-protected domains,
embarking with a sense of excitation to
explore a world outside those iron gates,
to fulfill their missions, away from patriarchal
bonds, with glimpses of a different landscape
on those silent roads, their silk-clad bodies
reclining among cotton-filled cushions,
protected from the heat and dust of those

white-sanded roads sun-silvered in the
scorching sun, savouring the freedom from their
preordained daily household duties, embellishing
themselves with their heirloom jewellery from silver
caches, the emblems and symbols of their hierarchical
inherited, prioritised status,

did they ever give thought to the men on whose
sturdy shoulders heavily burdened,
the long hard wooden poles rested in their feudal
servitude, sweat gleaming on their bare naked
torsoes in the scorching sun, searing their skins,
the heat seeping into the flesh,

men who accepted their vassalage without protest
as they bore those matriarchs through the diverse,
varied passages of their lives in those moments
of freedom from the menfolk to whom they
owed the duties and obligations of tradition-
bound wives,

what was their vision of the outside world,
narrowed by the partly obscured seclusion
within which they travelled, the seclusion, partial
that left them protected from disorder, turmoil,
disarray that would disturb their dormant

consciousness, hugging their secret thoughts
and emotions within themselves as they felt
at peace with the lulling slow jog-trot
movement and the rhythmic pacing of the men,
free, for the moment of their duties as women,
powerful in their domestic domains, with
numerous daily tasks to be performed,
paying attention to the constant guests
and visitors who entered their portals,
dignitaries, emissaries, desultory wanderers
in quest of hospitality, spiritual mendicants,
sadhus in their eternal pilgrimages.

In these undisturbed moments, their thoughts
and minds unruffled, they peered out at times
at a world that did not impinge on their
lives, menfolk carrying the paraphernalia of their
labour, women, old, young, supple, bent bodies,
going about their daily tasks, free, unhampered,
all them part and parcel of this familiar, well-known
landscape in this faraway nook tucked in between
groves of palmyrah, mango, bunches of
green bananas, acres of paddy, village abodes
hidden behind pleated fronds of palmyrah
fences, palatial houses dotted here and there

among blazing fire-flame clusters of
bougainvilleas, shrines, temples,

but the women I talk of, the women of the grove
had their day, performed their proven tasks,
marital and otherwise, bought forth their progeny,
arranged lives and marriage partners for their offspring,
made their vows and pilgrimages until those hierarchies
came to an abrupt standstill,
ancient inherited traditions dispersed
by time, age ruptured societies.
by the depletion of carefully apportioned out
larchems of land, the diminishing and the
gradual effacement of preordained patterns of
traditional decorated Kolams on their thresholds,
little did they realize that way of life
was ephemeral, illusory and impermanent,
that traditional structure not made to withstand the
cyclonic winds of change that swept over the
land, the cataclysmic events that made it
totter, fall, leaving only ruined foundations,
sharp-edge stones like cracked skulls littering the
overgrown pathways, the carved doors, the coconut wood
pillars, the pettagams filled with vessels of silver, brass,
copper spirited away, the wars had spawned stray

criminal elements, the courtyard just a mirage,
the fountain sunk into the arid earth, even the
portrait gallery of family photographs gone, gone, gone.

Who I wonder now sleeps on that wide four poster bed,
who gazes into the blurry mirror of the past,
who reclines on the sofas and divans, the carved
chairs and teapoys, vanished without a trace,

ousted all those occupants, only a stray record of
lineage and genealogy printed in some unknown
press is perhaps found abandoned somewhere,
death and displacement but in this family not in war,
transference to different hemispheres, unequal
apportioning out of land to those who did not give
a fig for that lost inheritance that had had its day,
long over and done with, deculturalised, deracinated,
no memory of the past disturbs or causes
perturbation of a way of life except in the gathering
and resurrection of scattered fragments of fast-vanishing
memory, no palanquin remains, no palanquin bearers,
no groves of plenty, no fields to sow and harvest
what remains then? the Bhairawa trident is still
rooted to the earth, yes, there are memorials that matter,

a dark hollow of murky stagnant well water,
reveals the neglect of time,

a defensive barrier put up by nameless
trespassers keeps out the true inheritors who retreat
from that forgotten past and now loiter about on the
outskirts of their ancestral land, themselves stray
mendicants, the new arrivals of those purloined
memories, stand in silence, forbidden entrance,
there are no sanctions to reclaim a paradise lost,
soldiers, militants, outsiders have tramped
across those acres, now only silence reigns,
no voices raised in recrimination,
no voices raised to claim that lost inheritance,
a phantom palanquin sails through the sky
like the magic carpet of Arabian tales, briefly,

and vanishes,

the grove cringes and cowers,
retreating within itself
hidden from the outlooker's gaze
as they turn away to take the road
back from the country of no return.

Navaly
Jaffna 2015

Traditions and Rituals

My husband has long been absent from his village
in the North, he wonders to himself,
'Is the kodiyettham ceremony still held
in that Ganesh temple built on our ancestral land?"
that pilgrimage, one that the family made year after
year has not taken place for many decades,
the remembered route after the family migration
to the South, reduced to a shambles
through the ravages of war, the roads mined.

Yet the deities remained, the rituals performed
by those who stayed behind,
the abodes of the deities undestroyed.

What of the descendents of that once powerful
family?

the emblems of hierarchy crushed underfoot,
did they ever think that they would be completely
effaced, that their sacred lands and impregnable
strongholds that had lasted for centuries

would be razed to the ground?
Power they possessed but within those
power structures there was also division,
the withholding of an inheritance from
those who transgressed those laws that closely
bound their clanship, kinship ties, with once so firm
a clasp had to give way, weakened,
frayed with time, the once firm indivisible
threads so strong-knit together, dangling unknotted.

Those boundaries once clearly demarcated
have shifted, the apportioned territories have
merged, the wilderness has obliterated those
unwavering lines of ownership and possession,
those ruthless, uncompromising laws that
dispossessed the one who was truly entitled to ownership,
the legitimate claimant to his inheritance.

The ink-filled quill incised its writ on the
smooth parchment of Deeds and Wills,
locked away in iron safes to be brought
out uncontested but the cataclysmic
happenings, unwilled, unforeseen, ignored those
legitimate claims empowered by the rogue
chicanery of war and invasive strangers

who outlawed the true inheritors.

Those Deeds that spelled out divisiveness have
now all been anulled, all those carefully
calculated larchems have changed hands,
the ownership in new hands, unchallenged
through fear of reprisals, all hierarchies
disbanded, edged out with insidious
subtlety and fraud, those Deeds once
watertight in their legal frames,
botched, smudged, tainted, destroyed.
Once not all could cross those sacred
thresholds or drink the unpolluted
waters of the well, or build abodes
where they desired, fraud, duplicity,
imposters won the day, the winds of
change had formed into cyclonic
devastating gusts that tumbled down, flattened,
left roofless those structures with their traditional
symbolic architecture, the ul-mutthams,
the thinnais, their shrine rooms and pillared hallways.

Chimeric images of the past dissolved wafted
away, in ephemeral, transient vistas
of what was doomed to disappear, vanish.

There is no one now to forbid the laying of
foundations wherever any outsider desired,
those domains are now freehold, an inheritance
of displacement, who is there to question the
forgeries of those unknown signatories?

Yet, there is one, once outlawed from those
domains, who remembers, that forgotten son
of that ancient household.

Beneath the brazen, scorching sun the blood-red
pinatu was poured onto woven mats
to grow firm, the molten lava from the juices
of the palmyrah fruit, layer after layer
seeping into the fibre of the woven strands
to form a serrated trellised patterning,
sometimes, well, oftentimes, the winds blew
over the grove covering the drying solidifying
mass with a fine patina of sifted sand
so that you threw it away, in repulsion or
ate it with a slight crunch between your
teeth, reminding you of wartime
reportage, the soldier who held his plate of
rice in his hands, the wind that blows
in this dry terrain covers the food with

a fine film of sand but he eats it
notwithstanding or else goes hungry.

Oh, no doubt, looking back the son of that family,
was feckless, discarded that inheritance,
the blame for being disinherited rests with him,
he was the despoiler of all they held sacred,

yes, he too was a tradition-breaker, that much
loved son, it was not the war alone but also
that outsider syndrome, that metaphysical
entrenchment of a stranger like myself although
I never saw myself as a usurper, had my
own way of life, never impinged on the
lives of others, yet those closely guarded
enclaves keep out strangers like myself
who travelled along unknown routes.

That son, long lost prodigal returns again and
again to his traditions, treads his padayatra
to the Ganesh temple, that world familiar to
him from childhood, speaking to his favourite deities
in that interchange of the sacred words he chants,

how else can all those devotees be released
of dross and suffering, they must worship with
their spiritual anima, offer pooja after pooja,

great trays of offerings, flower, fruit, camphor,
thirtham, tulsi, panchamirtham, sindhur,
lighting the sacred aalathi, a thousand flames
illuminating the inner darkness,

stands at the threshold of Kailasa,
in the courtyard of the peacock-haunted temple,
once there was a fawn too, doe-eyed, tremulous,
sensitive, free from fear, ears aquiver to the plangent
strains of the nadhesweran playing raga after raga.

It was to that Ganesh temple he would go
year in year out, the temple where he offered his poojas,
after he observed viridam, fasting from dawn,

it was there that from childhood he rang the
temple bell each evening to summon the devotees,
where he pleaded for propitiation for his sins,

he is now far, far from that village yet splinter-sharp
glass-shards of memory pierce his mind,
those iridescent facets revealing dreams and
visions of the deities who dwell and still dwell
in the grove, now mingling with all the displaced
who have a stake from times past, that land that
was once common ground.

In the Ganesh temple the self same manifestation
still exist, the visages of the deities unchanged,
the golden lights of the aalathi shimmering
on silks, jewels, garlands, gleaming oiled tresses,

yet he must return to his mundane existence,
to the careworn faces on the common streets he daily
treads, rub shoulders with the footpads and charlatans
but that he must do to preserve his common
humanity and survive with those who are his
everyday companions, engage in conversation on
the commonplace topics of the day in a language
familiar in its jargon and patois
transformed into slokas to the gods.

Introspection Poems

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

I think you have that classic gift of rendering "felt experience" without that too-heavy touch that spoils a lot of earnest writing, you have a rare clarity about the microtextures in daily life that catch the glint of the huge structural and institutional pillaging of people trying to live their lives, you have a generosity of spirit about people already having / their hands full just trying to live out their heart's wishes without the complications of the power demons and the succubi of greed, and you have a talent for that zen stroke that . marks the complex of bundled strands that readers must disaggregate and understand themselves, or not. And they're not all up to it: it's like all the great spiritual texts which are really spiritual tests. It's all there, but what can't be spelled out isn't. You get it or you don't. I'm not sure how many are willing to read it again until they do.

-Robert Seigle

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